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ABSTRACT

A case study approach was used to evaluate the statewide reading improvement project in Louisiana called Special Plan Upgrading Reading (SPUR). SPUR emphasized a change agent approach by providing Technical Assistants and small stipends (approximately $5,000) to participating school districts. During the first two years of the evaluation, primarily quantitative data were collected on achievement, services provided, and changes in classroom instruction. The case study approach was used during the third year, examining particularly successful instances of project adoption, to describe how SPUR worked and to explain why it worked. Twelve schools from six local school districts were examined in detail. Evaluators interviewed the local SPUR director, superintendent, principals, teachers, and the SPUR Technical Assistants. Questions involved the major project effect; the key person, event, or situation associated with its success; and suggestions for making SPUR more effective. Some of the conclusions were that (1) change followed a classic adoption-diffusion process, with situations affecting the rate of change; (2) support from the central office was crucial; (3) Technical Assistants were effective both inside and outside the school district; (4) change could be initiated either within or outside the school; and (5) side benefits were significant. (GDC)

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QUALITATIVE STRATEGIES IN EVALUATING A STATEWIDE INSTRUCTIONAL IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM

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Introduction

This paper describes a case study that was conducted in the spring of 1983 as part of the statewide evaluation of Louisiana's SPUR (Special Plan Upgrading Reading) Project. SPUR has been in operation since 1979, under annual state legislative funding as an effort to improve reading. Developed from earlier Right To Read efforts, SPUR emphasizes a change agent approach to instructional improvement by providing Technical Assistants and small stipends (approximately $5,000) to participating local education agencies (LEAs). One of the major ways in which schools involve themselves in SPUR is by attempting to meet the Criteria of Excellence for Schoolwide Reading Programs. This is a set of generic standards for instruction and programs; the entire process from initial self-study to the final peer review typically takes three years of work.

Purpose

During the first two years that SPUR was evaluated the information collected was almost exclusively quantitative. This was largely because of the size of the project (it involved some 64 LEAs and several hundred schools) and because the project's administrators felt that legislative and State Board of Education audiences wanted "hard" data about student achievement, amounts and types of services provided, and changes in classroom instructional processes. The case study was undertaken in the third year of the project as a means of examining particularly successful instances of project adoption to (1) describe how SPUR worked, and to (2) explain why it worked. This information was felt to be needed for several reasons. For one thing, the project staff hoped to disseminate information outside the State. Further, they were interested in some LEAs that had not followed the prescribed procedures exactly but had achieved good results and in cases in which they had received conflicting opinions about the project's value -- where, for example, principals prized one aspect while teachers downgraded it.

Method

The SDE SPUR staff nominated six LEAs that they judged to have been unusually successful in incorporating the project. Within these LEAs, the central office staff member who acted as the local SPUR Director was

asked to choose two schools that would give a good picture of SPUR. Most of these cases were success stories, but in two LEAs the Director deliberately chose one school that had achieved the Criteria of Excellence and one that was just beginning to participate. The principal of each school was, in turn, asked to select two teachers to be interviewed. In the majority of the cases more than two teachers were chosen. In several smaller schools the evaluators were asked to meet with the entire faculty, individually or as a group. To summarize, in each of the six LEAs the evaluators talked with the local superintendent, the central office SPUR Director, other central office administrators involved in SPUR, two or more principals, four or more teachers, and the SPUR Technical Assistant assigned to work with the school system.

The interview questions were developed by the evaluators and the SDE SPUR staff. The questions deliberately overlapped the different interview groups. All LEA interviewees were asked the major effect of the project, the key person, event, or situation associated with its success, and how SPUR could be changed to make it more effective. All LEA interviewees except the superintendent were also asked about the costs (fiscal and otherwise) and benefits of the project. Questions that were specific to the different groups generally explored their involvement, who they had worked with, and the personal benefits or difficulties they had met. The following table outlines the interview questions and the groups who were asked them.

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS AND RESPONDENTS						
	Supt.	Central Office	Director	Prin-cipal	Teacher	Tech. Ass't.
1) Major effect or change?	X	X	X	X	X	X
2) Key person, event, situation?	X	X	X	X	X	X
3) How would you change program?	X	X	X	X	X	
4) Costs, fiscal and other?		X	X	X	X	
5) Benefits?		X	X	X	X	
6) Your motivation to participate?	X	X	X		X	
7) Who in your organization involved?			X	X	X	X
8) What has been your role?		X			X	X
9) Who has worked with you?				X	X	
10) Personal gains from help/ participation?			X	X		
11) Major problems encountered?					X	X
12) How integrated with other LEA areas?	X	X				
13) Most important program aspect?	X					
14) What makes this LEA unique?						X

Each LEA was visited for a full working day by a team of three evaluators. These persons separated at the central office or school to conduct simultaneous individual interviews. In some cases the central office staff members or teachers asked to be interviewed as a group; in others the LEA SPUR director sat in on the interviews. In only one case was any discomfort on the part of an interviewee noted. That was in a small, rural school that had had little contact with the SDE and thought that the school, rather than SPUR, was being evaluated.

The evaluators made as thorough notes as was physically possible (taping and subsequent transcription was considered unfeasible). Respondents were allowed to bring up other topics as long as the evaluation questions had been addressed. Upon returning from the field visits each evaluator wrote up an individual narrative. These were compared and discussed for accuracy, similarity or differences of

observations and interpretations, and rewritten as individual LEA profiles. The evaluators noted what they felt to be key factors describing or explaining each LEA; they identified surface themes (things noted by multiple respondents such as the importance of teacher travel to visit other schools) and underlying themes (such as the crucial role of one identifiable advocate in project adoption).

Case Study Findings and Interpretations

The sample of LEAs, and the number of schools within these LEAs, was very small in this case study. The investigators also spent a limited amount of time at each site. As a result, the findings were presented to the project staff as possible explanations or alternative ways of interpreting events rather than as definitive descriptions of SPUR. In general these findings informed or threw a different light on basic beliefs held by the SDE and field SPUR staff members. The table below illustrates this correspondence.

Belief of SPUR Staff	Interpretation from Case Study
1) LEAs adopt the program at different rates because in some cases we don't follow our prescribed procedure.	1) Systems consistently follow a classic adoption-diffusion process and rate of change is affected by situational factors.
2) You have to get initial support from the local superintendent of schools.	2) One visible key advocate at the central office level is crucial; it doesn't have to be the superintendent.
3) The change agent role of the Technical Assistant is the crux of success.	3) Technical Assistants are effective because they have a dual insider/outsider role; they work for the LEA but they can take risks.
4) The process must move "top-down" and "bottom-up" at the same time.	4) Change can be initiated at either the school or central office; by the time effects are seen these groups have converged.
5) Technical Assistants do a lot of preparatory work, but it would hurt the project to show how much time goes to other than direct services.	

Belief of SPUR Staff	Interpretation from Case Study
6) The process of instructional change is more important than the content of reading improvement.	5) LEA staffs rate the inservice training as better quality than that given in university graduate programs, recognize the preparation time, and don't object.
7) SPUR is hard work, and should be made easier for schools.	6) The side benefits of change, such as increased school staff communication and school pride, are more important than the instructional outcomes.
	7) The difficulty of incorporating the process was cited as one of the major values; emotional commitment among teachers and principals was intense.

Agreement With Other Data

It has already been mentioned that SPUR is a statewide project. It employs approximately 70 field-based Technical Assistants and, within the general requirement of planning and implementing reading instruction improvement, LEAs are pretty much given free reign in defining and addressing their own needs. SPUR does not espouse any instructional model. The Technical Assistants instead work with LEAs and schools in helping them to incorporate those curricular and instructional practices that are in keeping with the LEA's philosophy, needs, and resources. One of the major problems when the evaluation was begun was finding factors that could be expected to hold true across the entire State. Thus, while test data, classroom observations, self-reports of teaching practices, and survey data about uses of and reactions to SPUR were used, it was never possible to examine the project as a whole with the resources available for its evaluation. The case study described here, while it was not extensive enough to serve independently as an evaluation of the project, explained and expanded some of the information provided through the quantitative methods. Some examples of this are given below.

1) While state Basic Skills Test scores showed that schools that had completed incorporating SPUR had significantly higher achievement than others, there was no difference between the performance of non-SPUR schools and those in other stages of project incorporation. In the case study teachers and principals explained that the process of completing the Criteria of Excellence for Schoolwide Reading programs was difficult and disruptive. Their own testing records typically showed a levelling or decline in the years preceding completion, and then a sharp rise after the Criteria had been attained.

2) Opinion surveys had showed strong approval for SPUR from most teachers, with equally strong disapproval from a small number. Teachers consistently stated that they disliked the project when their schools first became involved in it. The process demanded that teachers evaluate their own performance, share these evaluations with their colleagues, and then develop and implement plans and educational changes for their schools. This was threatening and required a lot of work after school hours and on weekends. The same teachers usually added that this discomfort was necessary and valuable.

3) An early attempt at describing the organizational structure had failed because respondents ignored the instructions to mark only one choice for each item asking who was responsible for a given function. This was initially interpreted as either unfamiliarity with the project on the part of the LEA participants or a fluke weakness in the survey design. From the case study it appeared that responsibility was never defined in exhaustive terms. Respondents might cite one person as primarily responsible for an area but would hasten to add that many others were involved. This factor appeared to be important in bringing teachers, principals, and LEA supervisors together in accomplishing changes.

Uses of Case Study

On the face, this case study should have had limited usefulness: after three years of operation both the State and field SPUR staffs and the evaluators felt that they were familiar with the project, and because of funding cutbacks SPUR was unable to follow through on the out-of-state dissemination that had been a major purpose of the report. However, the case study and its resulting report were considered valuable by both program and evaluation personnel. Some of the functions provided by the case study are given below.

1) Aesthetic distance. The case study was an independent and holistic picture of the program. It organized observations in a coherent, logical manner and interpreted their meaning. The SDE and field SPUR staff members said that this was helpful to them; they had not looked at their work from that perspective before, but had been more likely to separate their perceptions into things that were going well and things that were still problems. In a sense the case study was almost like watching a dramatization of an event after having participated in it.

2) Meaning. The case study was able to give meaning to the personal observations and evaluation information for both the SPUR staff members and the evaluators. It provided a narrative or descriptive context in which to interpret events or clusters of events. A good example of this was viewing the reported difficulty of achieving school Criteria of Excellence status in light of the intense emotional commitment observed among faculties in schools that had gone through the process. The case study organized these teachers' descriptions of what they had done so that the difficulty (and accompanying initial discomfort) appeared as a crucial part in ultimate program adoption.

3) Context definition. No evaluator is going to approach a study without first becoming as familiar as possible with the program. However, a case study conducted independently of

other evaluation activities can serve as a reality check for the evaluation and can inform subsequent evaluation activities. The case study made the evaluators smarter because its open-ended nature forced them to consciously set aside their preconceptions.

4) Strengthening reports. Being able to combine quantitative and qualitative data strengthens evaluation findings. The qualitative data suggest interpretations for other findings, while the quantitative information gives audiences some idea about the worth of the program. Audiences can be ambivalent in their information demands, asking for "hard facts" on the one hand and on the other being unable to concentrate on these facts when they are presented as naked tables of numbers. Good qualitative information allows an evaluator to make teaching stories out of evaluation reports.

Using Qualitative Data

This case study was conducted as a part of a longitudinal evaluation of a statewide, multicomponent program. The program itself presented many difficulties for the evaluators: evaluation resources were limited, objectives and activities changed annually although the basic goals did not, and LEAs were allowed a flexibility that led to sixty-odd different programs throughout the State. The utility of this one case study thus depended to a large extent upon the nature of SPUR. In this case, qualitative and quantitative data were used as parallel kinds of information to generate an evaluation process of tentatively defining what the program meant, testing this with descriptive or relational quantitative studies, and then reinterpreting the meaning. The process is envisioned as a continuing one, sketched briefly in the figure below.

QUALITATIVE	QUANTITATIVE
Descriptive - Total	Descriptive - Components
Narrative	Relationships
Interpretive	Outcomes

MEANING ⟶ TEST ⟶ MEANING

There are some caveats to using case studies in the manner described here. They are time consuming; in this case each staff day in the field was accompanied by about four days of planning or writing time in the office. For this project, case studies would not be appropriate as the single or major evaluation methodology. Those who fund and administer SPUR are primarily interested in knowing what effect it has upon students' reading abilities.

The case study was also less comfortable for the evaluators than quantitative approaches, although they do not know whether this is a function of their own backgrounds or the nature of non-numeric data. In this instance the only way of judging whether the proper data had been attended to, or the appropriate interpretation had been given, was to check the frequency and relationships of observations within the notes and the perceptions of program participants and other evaluators. The evaluators were always uncomfortably aware of the opportunity for creative writing.

In balance, however, the method was felt to be very useful and the Bureau of Evaluation has begun using qualitative data far more extensively than in the past. Group and individual interviews have been the basis for the Louisiana Chapter 2 evaluation and a policy advisement study of alternative strategies for the State testing program. In the instance described here, a case study was added to SPUR's existing evaluation as an independent component. Recently the Bureau of Evaluation received a grant from the U.S. Office of Education to evaluate preschool handicapped programs in the State. The design for

that study requires a blending of qualitative data and case studies to develop and test program models. The expectations are that qualitative approaches will continue to be employed in the Bureau's work.